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## **Band gives maligned polka a step, hop, step into mainstream ... even 'The Simpsons'**

By Walter Tunis

Consider, if you will, the poor polka. For ages, it has been the ugly duckling of the music world, a dance sound ridiculed as too square for anyone other than devout traditionalists or comics who seize upon it for purposes of parody (Weird Al Yankovic, for instance).

So how is it that a rock outfit from Denton, Texas, has made a living exploring polka for the better part of three decades? For Brave Combo, polka is not only resourceful enough to get multiple generations on their feet and in the groove, it's a steppingstone to the music of the world.

"What polka is to the world and what polka is to us is the cornerstone of what we're about," said Brave Combo guitarist, keyboardist, accordionist and founder Carl Finch. "We intentionally took the most maligned music in the world and tried to see if we could mess with people's perception of it. It wasn't just some funny experiment, either. We were truly digging the music. We thought, 'Man, this music has never been perceived properly in the mainstream world.' So we wanted to change that perception, especially beyond people's love of the music as a novelty."

So in 1979, with punk and New Wave reaching even into the remote roots music corners of Texas, Brave Combo was formed. While a rock band at heart, Finch and company saw how young artists were electrifying and roughing up the musical corners of all kinds of music, from Tex-Mex to blues. Thus the band began forging a new electric sound for polka.

"Audiences were immediately receptive," Finch said. "In Texas, as it was everywhere when we were starting, there was a growing underground scene. And we were completely embraced by that community. Texas already had people like Joe King Carrasco, who was combining Tex-Mex, specifically the pumping sound of the Sir Douglas Quintet, with punk. That kind of stuff wasn't unusual down there."

### **Polka's popularity grows**

Though hardly a mainstream act, Brave Combo and its polka popularity grew steadily. David Byrne was taken enough to include the band in his 1986 film *True Stories*, and a pair of Brave Combo recordings, 1999's *Polkasonic* and 2005's *Let's Kiss*, won Grammys for -- you guessed it -- best polka album.

But the biggest invasion of the mainstream came when Brave Combo was invited to play an Oktoberfest celebration -- in animated form, mind you -- on a 2004 episode of Fox's *The Simpsons*.

"Something like that reinforces what we do to people who may have sort of heard of us," Finch said. "And there are a lot of people like that. They know who we are but haven't really checked us out. *The Simpsons* definitely helped us galvanize the band name with that group of fans. Beside, *The Simpsons* gives us way more street cred than a Grammy."

*The Simpsons* also opened doors to what has become a booming business for Brave Combo: movie and television scoring. The band's music is featured in the recently released independent film *Tortilla Heaven* and a new documentary on the State Fair of Texas, *A Fair to Remember*.

Such forays also highlight the fact that Brave Combo has broadened its music beyond polka. A typical recording by the band these days also includes cumbias, rumbas, meringues and even Greek *syrtaki* dance tunes.

### **Challenge of definition**

So how do you promote or even classify a polka band with such worldly tastes? That, Finch said, is the sort of marketing headache Brave Combo has grown accustomed to.

"That's been the curse and the blessing since the beginning. We've been so all over the map that people say, 'How do you find an identifiable sound?' And given what we do with polkas, we're forever walking the tightrope between the serious and the novelty.

"But focusing in on just one sound? We've tried to do that. But we have so much fun playing all this music that we get a charge just trying to pull the rug out from under ourselves. Facing these kinds of musical challenges is something we're never going to let go of."

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### **Brave Combo and David Gans**

When: 7 p.m. March 19 for *WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour*.

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